



TELLING THE STORY: A HAGGADAH FOR OUR IMMIGRANT CITY

SECOND EDITION



CREDITS

ARTWORK
Ali Fitzgerald

LAYOUT AND DESIGN
David Byrnes

PHOTOGRAPHY
James Maher

WORDS
Rabbi Joanna Samuels

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**AN INTRODUCTION TO
"TELLING THE STORY: A
HAGGADAH FOR OUR
IMMIGRANT CITY"**

Dear friends,

At Educational Alliance, our diversity is something we have always been extremely proud of. In the months following the 2016 Presidential election, we collectively witnessed a rise in hate crimes and hateful rhetoric across our nation. The diversity we value quickly became a target of extremists. We reject the crass isolationism and xenophobia that has targeted so many of our neighbors, and we affirm that people immigrating to the United States are essential to the dynamism and spirit of our city and our country.

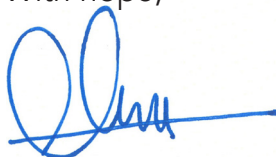
Within the pages of this Haggadah are the stories of just some of the many wonderful immigrants who make up the Manny Cantor Center community. Their stories are the story of the Lower East Side; their dreams are the American dream.

Originally published in 2018 with the support of a UJA Federation Neighborhood Improvement Grant, this second printing of *Telling the Story: A Haggadah for Our Immigrant City* beautifully showcases the connections between these modern journeys toward liberation and that of a people in exile 3000 years ago. I hope you find inspiration in these stories. I hope your faith in the human spirit is renewed.

Thank you to Rabbi Joanna Samuels, executive director of the Manny Cantor Center, for sharing her wisdom. Thank you to James Maher for his beautiful photography. Thank you to Ali Fitzgerald for her wonderful artwork. Thank you, especially, to the New Yorkers who shared their immigrant stories here, so that we might better understand the true meaning of the Passover story. And thank you for being a treasured friend of Educational Alliance.

Chag Pesach sameach!

With hope,



Alan van Capelle
President and CEO
Educational Alliance

**WHAT WOULD A
LIBERATED WORLD
LOOK LIKE?**

Equal parts prayer book, instruction manual, and storybook, a Haggadah is the volume that Jewish people have used over centuries during the Passover festive meal to narrate the story of their journey from slavery to freedom. As the Book of Exodus recounts, the Israelite people were enslaved for generations by a cruel Pharaoh in Egypt. After years of torment, God heard the cries of the people and liberated them from slavery, enabling them to cross through the Sea of Reeds to freedom. The traditional Haggadah tells this story, and includes prayers, songs, commentaries, and instructions to eat special foods.

The magic of the Haggadah—and of Passover as a whole—is that it forces participants to personalize this ancient story. The Haggadah does more than narrate history; it invites all people to understand their own histories and present days. While the core texts and concepts have remained consistent over time, each generation has added its own ideas—civil rights, feminism, GLBTQ rights, and animal rights, to name a few—to illuminate an ancient story through a contemporary lens. As the tradition teaches, “In every generation a person must look upon him or herself as though s/he had personally left Egypt.”

This invites us to place ourselves in the story. What are examples of present-day slavery, from which people need to be liberated? Are

they places? Are they mindsets? And what does liberation look like for each one of us? Is liberation a change of venue, a change of heart, a change of approach?

What would a liberated world look like?

Telling the Story: A Haggadah for Our Immigrant City invites you into the liberation stories that pulse in the life of our great city and particularly on the Lower East Side. We collected the stories of 25 members of Educational Alliance’s Manny Cantor Center that are contained in this volume during the holiday of Sukkot, in October 2017. Like the Israelites who left Egypt, the individuals highlighted in our Haggadah have traveled, they have wandered, and they have left the familiar for the unknown.

We embarked on this project for two reasons: first, we wanted to highlight the individuals and their unique stories who make up our community, whose bravery and resilience are truly what makes our country great. In addition, with anti-immigrant rhetoric on the rise, we are affirming that the journey to freedom is not yet complete until all people, everywhere, are free to build lives of safety and dignity.

RABBI JOANNA SAMUELS

FIRST CUP

WHEN HOME IS NO LONGER HOME

THE STORY OF THE ISRAELITES' LIBERATION FROM EGYPT BEGINS EARLY IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS. EGYPT, A PLACE THAT FELT LIKE HOME FOR MANY YEARS, WAS NO LONGER HOME.

"A new Pharaoh arose in Egypt, who did not know Joseph," teaches the Torah. And this new Pharaoh transformed his country from a place where the Israelites had thrived, to a place where they were cruelly enslaved.

So many of our immigrant stories start this way. Home is no longer home, whether

because of politics, or opportunity, or personal safety. There is a moment when a person knows that he or she must leave the hardship of what is known for the possibility of what is not yet known.

The word for Egypt in Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*, which is linked to the Hebrew word for narrowness or constriction. And so for the Israelites, leaving Egypt meant leaving a place of narrowness—a place that constricted their ambitions, their potential, and their well-being. This is the essence of the immigration journey—of the stories in this volume and of the stories of the 60 million migrants traveling across our planet today. They are traveling, from the familiar to the expanse, from the place of limitation to a place where there is possibility. May they find blessings on their path.



THERE WERE SO MANY REASONS THAT I CAME.

I'm from El Salvador, an hour from San Salvador. I came to New York in 2002 by myself when I was 18. There were so many reasons that I came. I wanted to be better, to prosper, to be a better person, and to get out of the danger. My country right now is very dangerous and also there are no opportunities. Even for people that have degrees, it is hard to find jobs. There is a lot of robbery, a lot of guns, young people gather together and do bad stuff to the working people.

It's your country and you can't feel free. You're always afraid of something, and I think that was one of the major things that made me get out of there. I wanted to work hard and get an education. It was too dangerous for my kids. I got married here and I have four children.

KARLA

I'm from Syria, and I came to the States in January 2012. I lived through about nine months of the uprising. My family just got out recently. My dad made it in a boat to Italy. He almost drowned in the sea and was rescued by a Netherlands ship. He made his way to Sweden. My mom and the kids, they left the country about 22 months ago.

I'm from Homs, which is where the uprising started. Before the uprising, Syria was a peaceful, welcoming country. People there were really nice, welcoming, and loved everyone who visited the country. You would just be walking in the street asking for directions and the minute they found out you were a foreigner, everyone would invite you for a tea. In our tradition, this is a sign of welcoming people and offering peace, to make you feel like you are in a safe country.

The minute the uprising started, it was a war zone, so people started fighting each other for the simplest needs, sometimes for money, for bread, or for the basic needs of daily life. That was the time I lived in Syria. The majority of people in Syria are Muslims, but Muslims come from different branches, and my whole village was a minority within a minority, so the whole village was targeted over and over. When I was there, one time at three o'clock in the morning—I cannot forget that day—they dropped a bomb over the village. This is where me and my dad sat down and said, "It's time to leave the country." I never, ever imagined that these things would happen in my country.

FATIMA

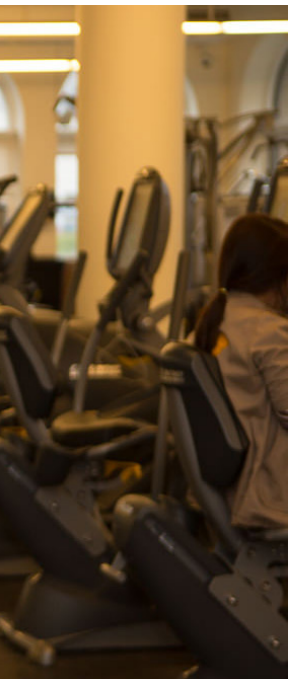




YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE DAY WAS GOING TO HOLD.

I'm originally from Colombia. I was raised in Bogotá. When I moved to the States, when I was 16, it was a difficult time in Colombia. We didn't realize the stress that we lived under until we moved here. You didn't know what the day was going to hold. There were a lot of terrorist attacks. There was a combination of poverty, lack of education, and corruption. Lack of money motivated people to do things that were wrong, like kidnapping. My mom had her own business there for many years. She used to have a packaging facility of salt, so she would buy salt wholesale, have it processed, packaged, and send it to supermarkets. At some point her warehouse got emptied three times in one year, so she wasn't able to recover from that.

CAROLINA



I was born in Nigeria. I came over when I was three in 1997. My mom's sister's husband was in this country already and he was ready to bring his family from Nigeria. Public education wasn't the best, so my mom sent me to America with my aunt and uncle to get citizenship. I was adopted and I stayed with them to get a better education and have more opportunities that weren't provided to me in Nigeria.

My biological parents are both still in my life, but they're in Nigeria. I see my mom once a year, but I didn't see my dad until I was 13. I had an estranged relationship with my dad but I had a complicated relationship with my mom because she knew my aunt and uncle weren't treating me well, and I struggled with why she was allowing that to happen. Why

wasn't she advocating for me or speaking up for me? So I resented her for a very, very long time.

My aunt and uncle, they were more guardians for me. They made sure to provide shelter and food, and I got a good education, but it was really hard. They had four kids, and I was like a Cinderella story, taking care of the younger ones, making sure the house was clean, making sure I was cooking.

ANONYMOUS



I'm from Honduras. I came here when I was 11 in 2012. First my dad came here when I was five. I was living with my mom and sometimes we wouldn't even have food to eat. It was really hard for her, so she left me with my grandma when I was seven and came here because she wanted to give me a better education. When my mom came here, I got really sick. I was vomiting for a long time. It got really terrible. I felt like I needed my mom.

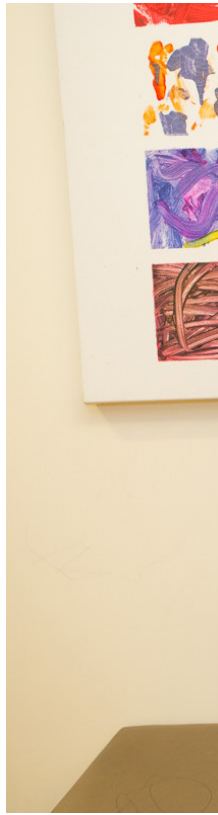
Then when I was 11 my dad asked for the papers so I could come here, and I was really happy seeing her after five years. It was just crazy for me—I was not believing it.

My dad started working as a welder and my mom, she barely finished sixth grade, so when she came here she didn't know anything. She still doesn't know English, so it was really hard for her. She started working cleaning restaurants. When I came here, I didn't even know how to say "Hi."

GABRIELA

**WHEN I
CAME HERE I
DIDN'T EVEN
KNOW HOW
TO SAY "HI."**

I JUST REMEMBER WANTING TO LEAVE BECAUSE IT WAS SCARY.



I'm from the Ukraine. I was born in Crimea but lived in Odessa until I was eight and a half. I lived in the cultural epicenter of Ukraine. Odessa is very welcoming, open, tons of Russian Jews and people coming from all over the world.

The tradition in the former Soviet Union is that when the family leaves, the whole town comes to say goodbye because it is such a big and traumatic event for the whole community. We were like a family. Even playing in the yard, everyone watched the kids. Everybody was involved in raising children.

I remember very well what it was like there. I just remember wanting to leave because it

was scary, especially with the Soviet collapse. I remember the whole terrible immigration process, the customs officials, I remember us coming, I remember everything. It was a traumatic experience. We were fleeing as refugees. Well we received refugee status but it wasn't as bad as in the '70s and '80s when a lot of people were refused entry. This was already post-Soviet collapse in 1994, but still it was all about who you know, and how can you get this to happen. We were lucky because my dad's family emigrated from the Soviet Union in '91.

My mom is not Jewish, but we were able to go because my father is. There was a lot of controversy. There was looting because the economy was so unstable. People



were worried about the second coming of pogroms. If people owned things, suddenly it wasn't theirs. There was inflation; one day the cost of a loaf of bread was the same, the next day it was like a case of champagne. Everything was in flux.

I remember walking to the Opera House and my dad covering me. There were signs that said "Zhyd," which translates to kike—something that no one expected in that city, so we needed to go.

I first heard the word *Zhydovka*, which is the feminine version of kike, at customs when we were trying to leave. Everything was tarified. Suddenly my mom's jewelry box became like she was stealing an art possession of

the country. I'm there seeing this guy call my mother all these horrible names. I became this sudden adult at eight and a half. I remember crying and having to lie so they thought I had a stomach ache rather than me being scared. Our suitcases were torn apart looking for everything they could get money for. My mom, she was wearing her cross, and the guy was livid and saying all these horrible things. I'm trying to translate but there's no word I think that can translate the gravity of what was said.

JANE

THE GOLDEN DOOR

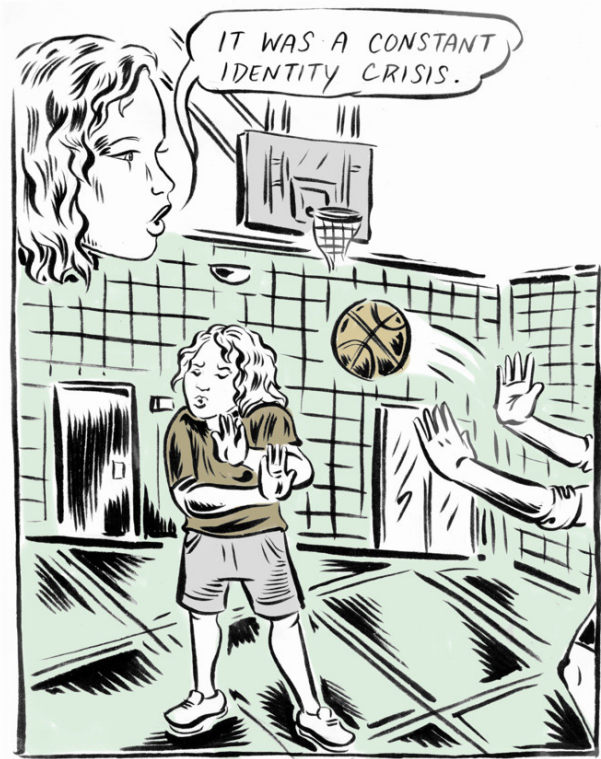
In 2017, in the wake of Donald Trump's election as President of the United States and a documented rise in hate crimes across the country, artist and writer Ali Fitzgerald met with members of New York City's immigrant community to hear their stories firsthand. Interviews were conducted at Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center, on the Lower East Side. *The Golden Door* is a comic that tells the stories of these New Yorkers, which was originally published in *New York Magazine's The Cut*. Portions of *The Golden Door* are excerpted here and throughout *Telling the Story: A Haggadah for Our Immigrant City*.

JANE IMMIGRATED FROM THE COLLAPSED SOVIET UNION WHEN SHE WAS 8.



WHEN WE FLED, IT FELT LIKE EVERYONE WAS WEARING 10 DIFFERENT COATS ON THEM.





SECOND CUP

IN THE WILDERNESS

**THE ISRAELITES' JOURNEY FROM
SLAVERY IN EGYPT TO FREEDOM IN
THE LAND OF ISRAEL WAS NOT LINEAR
AND IT WAS NOT SHORT.**

They wandered for forty years in the desert, while they learned what it meant to live without the shackles of slavery. They longed for the food they used to eat in Egypt, they rebelled against their leaders and each other, and they complained that it would be preferable to return to being slaves.

This is the essence of the migration story. Regardless of the harsh conditions that drive people from their homes, our souls seek out the familiar: the feeling of being in one's childhood home, the smell of foods, the

sound of everyone speaking a language that is known. Even knowing everything we know about the hardships of home, we long for its familiarity.

In the Torah this *dor ha-midbar*—this generation of the wilderness—lived with the uncertainty and fear that form the foundation of being free people. Many of them did not live to see the place that was promised to them. In our own country, this is also true of immigrants. While they are living in the country that they sought, they do not yet live with the security and dignity they hoped for. May we recommit to the work of being a nation of immigrants, and in so doing, ensure that the American Dream still thrives for all who live here.



In school, I was picked on because I had an accent, I was Nigerian, I was skinny, I was too black, my hair was too this, or I was too white because I took school seriously. Education is key in a Nigerian household.

It was this weird dynamic where other students of color that I thought I would have camaraderie with and thought they would understand me, they didn't—they picked on me. I wasn't accepted fully as being black.

I was African, the African booty scratcher. "She's so white because she doesn't live in the projects." I was just angry all the time, so of course I was acting out in school, in class. I got good grades, but I was ready to curse anybody out because I didn't really care. I couldn't do anything right at home, at school, so I just hated everybody.

ANONYMOUS

I knew no one here. I had a room through a friend of a friend of a friend of one of my lecturers. It was a pretty rough neighborhood on the Upper West Side, and the taxi driver said, "I don't want to let you out here." I said, "Oh, it's alright," completely naïve. It was on the cusp end of the crack epidemic and it was pretty hairy. I got out of the taxi and had

a bullwhip whipped in front of my face. I got my bags and said, "Excuse me," and the guy looked at me like, "What the hell's going on?" because I looked like Kurt Cobain with my Doc Martins and Sonic Youth t-shirt.

ILLTYD



**I KNEW
NO ONE
HERE.**

**MOST OF THE TIME I
WOULD END THE DAY
WITH A HEADACHE
BECAUSE I WOULDN'T
UNDERSTAND
ANYTHING.**

At first I did feel welcome. I came to a place where there were a lot of Spanish-speaking people. They all went through the same thing I went through, so they felt how I was feeling in that moment. Then when I started high school, it was really tough for me because Manhattan is diverse, so a lot of people just speak English. I couldn't understand anything.

Most of the time I would end the day with a headache because I wouldn't understand anything. Sometimes I used to cry because I used to get bad grades, and when I was in my country I used to get high grades. It made me sad when I would see my grades and see that I would get a C average.

GABRIELLA

It was very difficult, the beginning. At some point my mom broke her arm delivering newspapers. We had to go through some things that living in Colombia we would have never thought we'd have to do. My mom wasn't able to work fully for some time, so that left my brother and I having to work before high school delivering newspapers, and then after high school was over, my first job was at Burger King. We tried really hard. It was already hard, but that just made everything so much harder. We went through years where I didn't think college was a possibility for me, where I didn't think we were going to get anywhere. We had to move the three of us to one bedroom in a lady's house. And then I found a job as a nanny, so I was living as a nanny in someone else's house taking care of their three kids as best as I could. I waitressed for a long time. I thought, "Okay, this is it. That's what we do."

CAROLINA



I came here in 1991 and I did not get used to the American life. In China, I worked in a laboratory in a hospital. I'm a technician. When I first came here, everything for me was the wrong thing.

My brother said, "America is not good for you because you cannot do the labor jobs. Everyone goes to work. If you live in the home, you will be crazy."

For a living, at first because I didn't know English and I could not get a better job, I worked in a garment factory.

For me, it is difficult because I have polio. I walked with difficulty, with a cane, and so if I did the seamstress work, I worked very slowly. They count the pieces, so I could not make more money. So I found a job in the garment factory as a cashier. I worked Monday through Saturday. I worked a lot and then I felt very tired. It was long hours for low pay, for sure.

WEN FEI



WHEN I FIRST CAME HERE, EVERYTHING FOR ME WAS THE WRONG THING.

My parents met in Puerto Rico. They moved because of the economy when my mother was only 19. She told me a story about how she went looking for jobs in the Garment District in wintertime, and to her all the buildings looked alike, so she couldn't remember which was her building. She kept going past it. She was crying because she didn't speak a word of English. All she could say was, "I'm lost." A cop stuck it out with her. He felt compassion for her and he walked with her, and then she eventually found it. He told her to memorize the number of the building and how many blocks it was away.

EVELYN

I felt like an observer when it came to my ability to articulate my thinking in English. I call it the second latent period of my life, where I decided almost not to talk, and I love to talk.

For a good seven years I held back in a way because I didn't have that confidence. Going to graduate school helped me to develop some ease. It still hurts my mouth, breaks my teeth, but I have the courage to just speak whatever comes out of my mouth. That's something I didn't even have six or seven years ago.

MARIANO

My mother came before me for better opportunities, and then I came to the U.S. in 1988 when I was seven. When my mom came to pick me up, I was calling my aunt my mom. I didn't know who she was. It turned into a fight between her and my aunt because all my life, my aunt was my mother. Even when I came to the country, though I was calling her mom, I still didn't feel the connection. And throughout my whole life, it became that way with my mother's side of the family. She was never there, and then I never really had conversations with her that any child should.

The cultural ways that they approach kids—kids are supposed to respect their elders, and anytime you speak to an elder your head is supposed to be down. Looking at them face-to-face is saying that you are the same level as them and you're pretty much going to get your butt whooped.

I didn't understand who I was as a teenager growing up, so I was a troubled teen. Teenage years are the most vital years where kids can go any way. I didn't really go to school. I would take the school bus, get to school, hop on the city bus and go to Washington Park in Bridgeport, hang out with kids around my age, and sell drugs all day.

When I first came, it was challenging. First, being undocumented, it was hard to get a job. That was the first obstacle, and the second was no English. I said to my husband, I can't live here because it's too difficult.

I went to school. That was the solution. I needed to learn and I didn't want to depend on others. I saw close families and relatives, how they've been here for 20 years and how they still depend on translators. I said, "I don't want that for myself."

I started working housekeeping in Brooklyn, cleaning apartments. I couldn't get a good job because of my status, and I started going to school at night. I had access to a close community college, which I had to pay for, but it was helpful. It helped me to put away my fears because I was so afraid to start learning. It is hard to learn when you work the whole day and go to school at night.

KARLA

CROILOT



I TOLD MY MOTHER, "SEND ME BACK."

I was born here and raised on the island of Montserrat in the Caribbean. I came here when I was 14. When I arrived, it was the first snow and I wanted to go back. I told my mother, "Send me back." But she said, "I'm your parent so you got to stay with me." I was crying all winter long.

MARY BELLE

I didn't even know how to say "water" in English. It was really difficult.

I went to an ESL class to learn English, and I went to Washington Irving High School. It was really cold. Where I come from was tropical weather, and I was constantly shivering. The cold was terrible.

RUTH

The funny shock for me was that we read all this propaganda about fat Americans and about how everyone's wealthy and everything's clean, and I come in and the first thing I see was dog poop on the street. I was like, "This is not what I heard. This is quite dirty."

My mom ended up leaving my dad. Immigration is a hard time. A lot of people fell into depression, and there were a lot of divorces happening around that time. My mom decided she wanted the "real America" and she moved us to Indianapolis, where I hated living, and every vacation I just wanted to go back to New York to be with my family and friends. There I was completely misunderstood. I felt like I knew more about different cultures and geography, and in general, just about life. Even though on one hand I had been closed off because in the former Soviet Union you didn't learn. Speaking Russian was embarrassing to me. I closed off. I shut down.

I was called a communist and I was bullied. For some reason Ukraine sounded like Bahrain and I got called things for that. I just kept feeling like I was the other, for the entire time. I was ten or 11, and I was there until I moved back when I was 17.

JANE

When I first got here, I could only get a job in a Chinese restaurant. I first lived in Indiana because my uncle opened a restaurant there. I think a lot of restaurants want the worker to have some experience, and when I first came I knew nothing, so I had to learn there, and then I could find another job. The houses were bigger. I didn't have a car. On my off day, I usually stayed in my apartment. I couldn't go out.

When the people talked to me, I didn't understand anything. I just worked and learned some English for the restaurant, like the food, the sauce. I never thought I would do that job in China. When I was in China, I did facials and it was easy for me, but the restaurant is very hard. From 10AM to 11PM, it's a long time. And if the restaurant is very busy you have to work hard all day, but everyone who came here is working like that.

RUI



**ON MY DAY OFF, I
USUALLY STAYED
IN MY APARTMENT.**

**GOD WAS MY
STRENGTH.**



It took three months from Panama all the way to North Carolina. The trip was by car and by foot. There was a small river we crossed and then the desert three nights. The south Mexican border, that's the toughest part to go because below Mexico you just bribe people. In the south of Mexico, I went to immigration jail. Twice we were caught by U.S. immigration and returned to Mexico. It was adventurous, but when I arrived I was like, "Holy cow, what have I done?" I could have died, been raped. God was my strength.

Once I was here, I thought in my silly mind that with the documents that had been accepted before, I would just go to college and say, "Here I am." I later found out that I needed a visa. I stayed in North Carolina for a year and I found out I could go to school here in New York City, so I went to CUNY LaGuardia Community College for two years and then I went to Baruch. I pursued

business. It's an enchanting city. I was doing housekeeping, gardening, babysitting, all these kind of odd jobs. I admired this particular family that was in business, but my heart wasn't there. I had promised my family, but really arts were in my heart.

You had all these financial institutions coming for the students, but I didn't have the documentation to work. I knew my reality then, so I just focused on working. People in class were talking about hanging out after class, while I'm thinking, "Hey, I'm running out of toilet paper." It was really tough, for about four years of me working, home, school, work, home, school. I felt I had no life, no social life. I was afraid. Nobody knew about my situation, not even my bosses, because I was afraid that they'd call immigration on me.

SILVIA

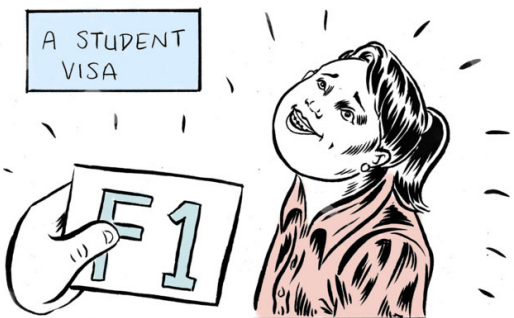
THE GOLDEN DOOR

When it first appeared in *New York Magazine's The Cut*, Ali Fitzgerald's comic series, *The Golden Door*, was published in six installments. Each told the story of an immigrant living on the Lower East Side. Although the details of the stories were unique to the individuals featured, common themes of fear, resilience, hope, and determination are threaded throughout—much as they are in the stories shared in *Telling the Story: A Haggadah for Our Immigrant City*. To read *The Golden Door* in its entirety, visit thecut.com/tags/the-golden-door.

VAL HAS HAD EVERY TYPE OF VISA :
A G4 VISA BECAUSE HER PARENTS
WERE DIPLOMATS



A STUDENT
VISA



AND NOW SHE HAS AN H-1B VISA
SPONSORED BY THE NON-PROFIT
WHERE SHE WORKS.



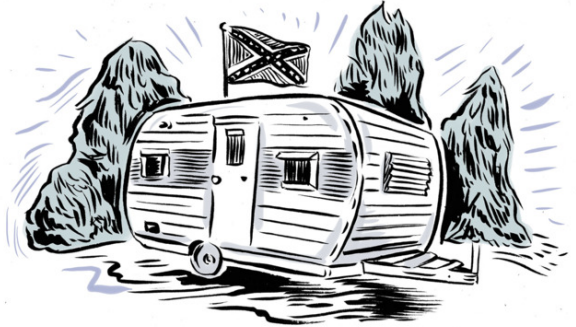
VAL IS ALSO A WRITER AND LAST YEAR WENT TO A RESIDENCY IN THE MOUNTAINS OF NORTH CAROLINA.



I SWEAR, THOSE MOUNTAINS ARE MY SPIRITUAL HOME.



BUT DOWN THE ROAD FROM THE FISH TILE MOSAICS AND POTLUCKS WAS A TRAILER COMMUNITY DRAPED IN CONFEDERATE FLAGS.



ANYTIME I MET SOMEONE, THERE WERE 30 SECONDS OF FEAR.



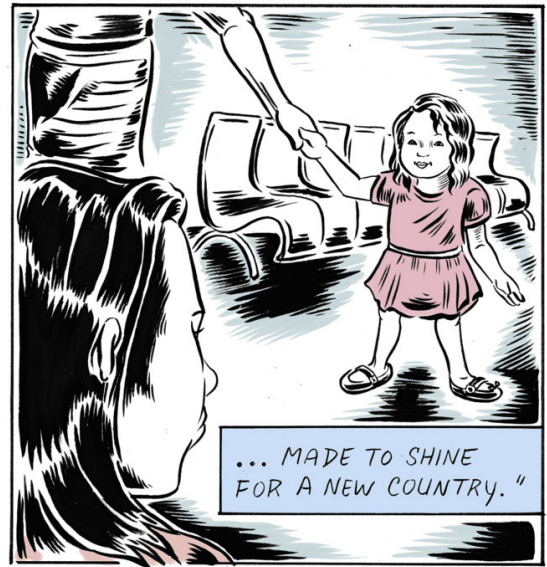
IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN TO MY FRIENDS IN NEW YORK THE DEEP POCKETS OF RESISTANCE IN NORTH CAROLINA—DEEPER THAN OUR FIGHT.

VAL LATER SHARED A PIECE SHE WROTE ABOUT ECLUSIVE IDEAS OF HOME:

"YOUR MOTHER DRESSES YOU UP FOR SCHOOL IN SHINY LEATHER SHOES, FRILLED DRESSES WITH MATCHING HEADBANDS PUSHING BACK YOUR DOWNY BLACK HAIR."



"EVER AFTER, YOU'LL HURT WHEN YOU SEE LITTLE BROWN GIRLS IN AIRPORTS ALL DRESSED UP IN FULL SKIRTS AND PATENT LEATHER SHOES ...



... MADE TO SHINE FOR A NEW COUNTRY."

THIRD CUP

TEN PLAGUES, TEN BLESSINGS

IN THE EXODUS STORY, GOD PUNISHES PHARAOH FOR NOT LETTING THE ISRAELITES LEAVE EGYPT BY SENDING THE EGYPTIANS TEN PLAGUES RANGING IN SEVERITY FROM SWARMS OF GNATS TO THE KILLING OF THE FIRST-BORN SON IN EACH FAMILY.

These plagues created intense suffering for the Egyptians. This is remembered during the Seder by each participant removing ten drops of wine from his or her cup to lessen our own joy because our freedom came alongside the suffering of others. On Passover, we hold both the joy of our freedom and the awareness of the imperfect world in which we live.

For immigrants, life is a constant mixture of hardship and hope. Each day that brings

new possibility sits alongside a day where frustration, loneliness, and struggle loom. Each forward step in a new country can make an immigrant feel farther away from the land of their birth. Each gain for oneself can sharpen the feelings of betrayal toward those back home.

And yet, the resilience in immigrants' stories are an inspiration—for all of us. This complicated navigation between old and new, disappointment and hope, familiar and unfamiliar—this is the essence of being human. The heightened sense of awareness that lives in these stories are a lesson in how to live with intention, presence, and drive. For each of the plagues that immigrants may experience on their journeys, may they know many more blessings.



**IT'S
GETTING
BETTER.**

It's getting better. At first it was really scary. It was too much because I could not remember anything. It looks simple, all these streets, but every door has something going on. It's not like this in Moscow. Every door has to have a store or a café, so for me it was just hard to remember places.

My English was worse at first, but when I came I immediately went to the library and took the classes for English and improved a little bit. It helped me because I also found some friends there and we still keep in touch. It was a really good experience and I'm glad that New York has this program for new people because it helps with English and with connections. I didn't know the system. It's little things—everything—how transportation works, insurance, even grocery shopping. I read some article where they said that immigration is the same type of stress as if somebody is deaf. It's stressful. I went through all of that. It's not easy.

People are friendly. I don't know if it's this neighborhood, but I think in general, Americans are very friendly. Coming here, I didn't meet many friends, but people are waving "hi." It's good.

My English is improving because I have studied here for almost two years in the ESL class. My friend told me about it. The classes really helped me a lot. In China, I can do anything in my language, but here I don't know how to do things.

I learned a lot about how to live here, like how to open a bank account and transportation.

I learn a lot of words from the class. And I have two daughters—one will be four in November and the other is two, and they both are in this school. This would never happen in my country because you would have to pay for an education, at any age.

For now, easy things I can handle by myself. I can go to the bank. Before, for anything, I had to find someone to help. I remember, when I first came, AT&T charged me \$1,000 for Wi-Fi. I didn't know how to fight them. I paid for that. Now I think, "I can fight that by myself."

RUI

MARINA

**DO I FEEL WELCOMED
IN NEW YORK? YES, I
DO. DID I HAVE CASES
WHERE I FELT I'M NOT
WELCOMED? YES, I DID,
UNFORTUNATELY.**

I felt very welcome in New York and especially the Lower East Side. You feel like no matter what your nationality or your religion, you fit perfectly because it's a melting pot. Here you look around and feel like a citizen of the world. I see all the nationalities, hear different languages everyday, which brings comfort. I wish people were living in harmony everywhere like they do on the Lower East Side because they just want to live. Do I feel welcomed in New York? Yes, I do. Did I have cases where I felt I'm not welcomed? Yes, I did, unfortunately.

This is still a great country. It's disappointing when you see people judging others based on skin color, religion, beliefs, backgrounds. I did not choose to be born in Syria, I did not choose to be born to a Muslim family, but I choose to be a fair person, the type of person who treats people equally. I choose to be understanding, open minded, a person who accepts other people no matter what. This is still a great country.

FATIMA

We moved to the neighborhood in 2013, and then I found out about Educational Alliance and how they provide childcare. I came to learn more. The public schools all have an ESL program, but they don't have free childcare. And since then they took care of my child while I take my classes. I started with ESL.

I feel grateful because I didn't have this for a long time. I could have been a student for a long time. It's nice to learn during the day because your brain is fresh and you are not tired.

I studied for a couple semesters and I realized I might be ready for the high school equivalency test, so I decided to take classes to prepare me. I did it for about two years, and thank God I just passed in September. I got my diploma—one dream accomplished. Now I'm thinking about college. I know it's going to be hard and I need to practice more. Educational Alliance helps you apply for college. I sent the application last month and I'm waiting for the answer. I'm thinking about studying either health or education. I now also volunteer at the [Manny Cantor] Center, helping out in the classroom because if I go into education I would like to have experience, and I would like to know if I will like it or not.

Sometimes you feel welcome and sometimes you feel rejected. People see you as an immigrant and see you as a stealer. I

experience good things and bad things, especially with my four kids. That part hurts. It's my life. It's my decision. I decide how many children I want to have, but sometimes people make you feel that you can't have more than one or two. The way they look at you, it makes you feel like you're not allowed to do it.

I learned that I have my rights. And I can't let nobody see me this way or criticize me this way. They don't know my life.

KARLA

Now it's diverse. We have so many different nationalities and of course new buildings, new construction. Everything has changed for the better. Even though sometimes you feel a little nostalgic about little things that you cannot see anymore, I think it's coming up really well. Now I can walk until three in the morning.

I felt welcome when I first came. I didn't think it was a big issue, at least that's the way that I perceived it at the time, but it was very different from now. It's totally different. I can see it. It's very sad and it does hurt because I know most of the immigrants that come, the reason is because they can't have a life in their countries, and they come and they're just here basically to work and to have a better life.

RUTH

The identity situation definitely played out with me growing up. This is one of the reasons why I went to school for history. I focused a lot on Caribbean studies and learning about the situation between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, between all the Caribbean islands, and the history behind how these two worlds, continuing to this day, clash with one another through political views, through racial views, through economic views, and so forth. I understand both sides of the story with my mother and my father now that I went through the whole history thing in college. I respect both sides.

CROILOT

Whatever money I was making was just to live. I was paying \$250 rent for a space in a living room in Queens. I was like, this is not life—I'm going to get my degree, and with this degree I can find any job in Peru. But before my senior year, I met the person who now is my husband, and he introduced me to yoga and meditation. I took yoga first because it got rid of my pain when I was doing housekeeping. Our years in the city, alone, I was like a stone. I wasn't that innocent child no more. My heart was an icicle and I guess I didn't notice it. It was

me drowning myself in this darkness, in the shadows. Why should it be easy for you when I had it tough? When I realized I was that way, I wanted to change, so then I pursued the meditation and everything changed. I wrote down a song. I loved art, so I started writing. Before I would only focus on the negative things.

SILVIA

People from my school who were born here, I guess they haven't been through what we have, so they think we came here and that's it. But they don't know what it's like to be in a place where you have no idea how to speak the language, and it's not like you choose to come here. My parents brought me here. I've got to stay here because my parents told me to stay and I want to be with them. I guess they just think we are less because we come from another country. I guess they just don't like us coming here. Some people don't end up getting an education because they are afraid to stand up and they give up easily. That just makes me want to work harder and get what I want.

GABRIELA

**PEOPLE FROM MY
SCHOOL WHO WERE
BORN HERE, I GUESS
THEY HAVEN'T BEEN
THROUGH WHAT WE
HAVE, SO THEY THINK
WE CAME HERE AND
THAT'S IT.**



People came to this country, especially my grandmother's generation, not speaking the language, from a very different culture, background, community, and landscape. She came here with very little money, completely by herself, didn't know a single person here, didn't speak the language, and worked her fingers to the bone 14 hours a day as a seamstress. She worked and worked to provide a life for my mother, to give her the ability, education, and support for her to better her life. I think that is more likely than not the real immigrant story: people who come from a place where the opportunity

is so slim to a place where they feel that opportunity is in abundance, that if you work hard you can achieve; you can support your family; you can send money back to your country. And my grandmother did do that. She sent money back to her family and flew her siblings out here so they could get their start.

JOANNA

**I THINK THAT IS MORE
LIKELY THAN NOT THE
REAL IMMIGRANT
STORY: PEOPLE
WHO COME FROM A
PLACE WHERE THE
OPPORTUNITY IS
SO SLIM TO A PLACE
WHERE THEY FEEL THAT
OPPORTUNITY IS IN
ABUNDANCE, THAT IF
YOU WORK HARD YOU
CAN ACHIEVE.**

Look at me. Look at where I've come from: 45 Essex Street, that's a tenement. I was a lieutenant before I retired and now I work for the New York Stock Exchange. All my cousins, we're all from the Lower East Side and we all did well, but the ones that did well also had very strong family roots. That plays a big part in it because we could have gone by the wayside and become junkies.

The teachers, the community, the ties—all helped each other. If I did something wrong, my parents would know before the night was over. You were able to carve out a niche where you felt comfortable with your own, and you benefited from the experience of the other cultures. My best friends were either Jewish or Chinese. In the beginning, one of my Chinese friend's parents said, "You can't come into the house." I used to have to wait outside in the hallway. Then eventually as time went on, I was allowed in. First, "Stand there," then another time, "Okay, come into the living room." A little inch. They were good people.

EVELYN

I came to Educational Alliance to get free college prep and SAT classes, and when it was time to fill out the college paperwork my aunt was like, "I'm not doing this. I'm not paying for this." My aunt wasn't even willing to fill out the forms that she needed to fill out. I could have literally gone to other schools for free because we were so low income, but she didn't want to do anything. I was livid, but I was more scared than angry because I always looked at college as my escape, and I felt like she was taking my escape away from me. I just packed up all my stuff and I went to my other aunt's house and never came back. I didn't say anything. But if it wasn't for Educational Alliance, my academic situation would have been very different in regards to college. They helped fill out paperwork, helped me apply for scholarships, and helped ensure that I would be able to go to school.

ANONYMOUS



**THE TEACHERS, THE
COMMUNITY, THE TIES—
ALL HELPED EACH OTHER.**

FOURTH CUP

MY RESPONSIBILITY, OUR RESPONSIBILTY

**ONE OF THE CENTERPIECES OF
A TRADITIONAL HAGGADAH IS
THIS STATEMENT:**

**IN EACH AND EVERY GENERATION, A
PERSON IS OBLIGATED TO REGARD
HIMSELF AS THOUGH HE ACTUALLY
LEFT EGYPT. AS IT SAYS: "YOU SHALL
TELL YOUR CHILD ON THAT DAY, 'IT IS
BECAUSE OF THIS THAT GOD TOOK ME
OUT OF EGYPT.'" (EXODUS 13:8)**

This statement helps us to see ourselves in the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt, but it also does something else. It reminds us that this journey, from slavery to freedom, is happening around us every day. Whether our own journey or that of our neighbors, co-

workers or friends, someone in each of our lives is living his or her own story of migration.

On the Lower East Side, and in so much of New York City, we know this well. We are surrounded by these narratives of bravery, of dislocation, of loneliness and of blessing. They are in the languages we hear on the subway, and the foods we smell in our apartment building hallways. They are in the holiday rituals we see celebrated in our communities, and in the ever-richer picture of what our city and our country looks like. These stories belong to us all, each one of us. We each hold the story of our own journey from slavery to freedom. May we each aim to be the champion and protector of the stories of others, as well.



**WE'VE BEEN HERE
BEFORE, AND IF
WE NEED TO LEARN
SOMETHING FROM
HISTORY, THIS IS
THE TIME.**

We've been here before, and if we need to learn something from history, this is the time. History repeats itself perfectly. It's the same means, the same aesthetics. This is not the first time—this resonates with something very ugly in European history not so long ago. We need to place immigration again as a value of American ethos.

MARIANO

Immigration is very important because everywhere you go you see immigrants and how helpful they are. Every time I eat an apple, I eat a strawberry, or I pour milk into my cup, I think about who brought this. Everybody has different roles, and this is an important one. We need each other, and it hurts when people say these people are bad and these people are good. We all need each other. We need you because you are good at computers, you are a doctor, or you make me feel well, but you also need me. I bring your food onto your table, which you cannot do because you are busy. Everybody is special, everybody is good at something. So it hurts when they say these people are bad.

KARLA

Immigrants built the United States of America. All these great minds who migrated because they did not have the chance in their country, they found a society that protects them. You can get the best out of them after moving them from a very strict environment or very hard circumstances. When you move them to a different society, this is where human beings' minds start creating.

A lot of people are saying it's not our responsibility to accept refugees here. What if every single person said, "Why is it my responsibility?" We have a saying in our culture, "If you did not scream for your neighbor, your neighbor will never scream for you." For us who live safely and who have a good lifestyle, have jobs, we are stable—if it's not our responsibility, then whose responsibility is it?

These refugees are someone's brother, sister, dad, and mom. Just imagine if you were living in that country and that happened to you. Wouldn't you wish that other countries would at least reach out and accept you, give you an opportunity, give you the chance to live? These refugees are not asking for anything. They are just asking for the chance to live as normal human beings.

FATIMA

I'm having a hard time with my own family, and it's hard because you love your family. It used to be that political views didn't really matter, but there's something about this particular presidency that's causing a lot of separation within families and close friends. I think a lot of it is a fear, and it's a fear of the other. From what I understand, it's also that fear of going back to Soviet times. "Socialism doesn't work, this is what happened to us, and it won't happen." That's the fear, so it's against this idea of socialism. Others were helping us. What about you? It's just so mind-boggling to me. Why do you think that you're not just as responsible for others as they were for you? There were programs in place, by people who knew nothing about us, to help us.

JANE

Now I'm in my second year of graduate school for social work. My concentration is social enterprise administration, and I'm looking into social impact and social impact investing, social entrepreneurship, and things of that sort. I'm interested in criminal justice, understanding racism, systemic racism. I think that after school programs are very important, and I think we underutilize them. They can be very valuable in communities of color, so I would be interested in directing a program specifically targeting underrepresented youth and helping them find themselves, be empowered, and gain access. I'm interested in access. How do we get young people of color into places like J.P. Morgan or big roles in policy? How do we break that glass ceiling? How do we create access and opportunity and make sure our young people feel safe and invited into those communities?

ANONYMOUS

**I'M INTERESTED IN
ACCESS...HOW DO WE
CREATE ACCESS AND
OPPORTUNITY AND
MAKE SURE OUR YOUNG
PEOPLE FEEL SAFE AND
INVITED INTO THOSE
COMMUNITIES?**

THIS PLACE IS KIND OF A GREENHOUSE FOR NEW IDEAS AND NEW TYPES OF CULTURE.

I can compare to my country: when someone comes to my country as an immigrant, there is no real help. Basically no one will help you to learn the language, there are no special schools, it's just on your own. You have to learn everything yourself. Here, at least in New York, you feel the support for immigrants. If you want, you can find it.

You can learn the language in the library and have some avenues to meet people. In America, I like this idea that you can go to school at any time, so I also think maybe I should get some local education too and do something completely new. It really amazes me. It's a country of possibilities. If you want, you can really change your life anytime.

MARINA

In a way this place is kind of a greenhouse for new ideas and new types of culture. I think that kind of creates a grassroots growth. If it helps generate confidence in both the immigrants but also other people to be able to speak their mind openly and stand up for themselves, they can definitely do that in this community. I think it encourages them to do that also outside, hopefully with other people.

AMIEL

I think if New York City was without immigrants, it might be empty.

RUI



**I THINK IF NEW YORK
CITY WAS WITHOUT
IMMIGRANTS, IT
MIGHT BE EMPTY.**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ALI FITZGERALD

Artist and writer Ali Fitzgerald met with members of New York City's immigrant community to hear their stories firsthand. Interviews were conducted at Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center, on the Lower East Side. *The Golden Door* is a comic that tells the stories of these New Yorkers, which was originally published in *New York Magazine's The Cut*. Portions of *The Golden Door* are excerpted throughout *Telling the Story: A Haggadah for Our Immigrant City* and are republished with permission of the artist.

JAMES MAHER

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RABBI JOANNA SAMUELS

Rabbi Joanna Samuels, the founding executive director of the Manny Cantor Center, is a nationally respected spiritual leader and social activist. In her role as the founding executive director of the Manny Cantor Center, Joanna is redefining the Jewish Community Center and the Settlement House for a new era. Prior to joining the Educational Alliance in 2012, Joanna served as the Rabbi of Congregation Habonim in New York City, where her leadership is widely credited with helping revitalize the synagogue's community. She also worked as an advocate, strategist, and mentor for women's advancement and gender equity in the Jewish community at Advancing Women Professionals. Her commitment to women leaders in the Jewish community led her to be the first female rabbi honored by the Drisha Institute. Joanna has written for local and national publications and taught at many institutions throughout New York City.

UJA FEDERATION

Educational Alliance is a proud partner of the UJA Federation. The UJA funds a network of hundreds of nonprofits, including more than 80 core partners—social service agencies, Jewish community centers, summer camps, and Hillels—in New York and around the globe. To find out more about the UJA visit ujafedny.org.

ABOUT EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE

Educational Alliance brings together and partners with diverse communities in Lower Manhattan, offering individuals and families high-quality, multi-generational programs and services that enhance their well-being and socioeconomic opportunities. We are the town square for the Lower East Side, a place where everyone is welcome and where progress is powered one relationship at a time. We are proud of our legacy as a Jewish organization and we provide high-quality, transformational services and programs to all New Yorkers through our network of community centers on Manhattan's Lower East Side and East Village. As we have for 130 years, we offer best-in-class programming—now across 15 sites—focusing on a mix of education, health and wellness, arts and culture, and civic engagement. Our network of community centers includes the 14th Street Y, the Center for Recovery and Wellness, the Manny Cantor Center, the Sirovich Center, and Educational Alliance Community Schools.

ABOUT MANNY CANTOR CENTER

The Manny Cantor Center, originally Educational Alliance's flagship settlement house, is now a community center for all in the Lower East Side. Offering exciting events, award-winning programs, and critical services for people ages 0 to 100+, the Manny Cantor Center is a hub of diversity and inclusivity, of health and fitness, of education and of excellence. We hope the Manny Cantor Center will provide a space for growth, achievement, enjoyment, and connection for all Lower East Siders today.



Educational Alliance
www.edalliance.org



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